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W.E.B. DU BOIS ON RACISM THEN AND NOW

It's a great honor to be with you this morning. I am a member of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia and am rather embarrassed that I've never visited here before. I am grateful to Rita for the invitation to talk about W.E.B. Du Bois and what I have learned from his book, *The Philadelphia Negro*. It's not too far-fetched to imagine that, given somewhat different personalities and political circumstances, we could be celebrating a national holiday in honor of Dr. Du Bois tomorrow instead of Dr. King. I want to tell you about my path in coming to research Du Bois and what this work means to me and to my understanding of racial discrimination and inequality today. But first let me tell you something about Du Bois and his study of Philadelphia.

THE INVITATION

The invitation to come to Philadelphia wasn't a particularly good one. It involved only temporary work, not a permanent position. And while the invitation nominally came from the University of Pennsylvania, it was really the reform-minded ladies of the College Settlement Association who had the idea for a study of blacks in Philadelphia. Penn offered Du Bois the temporary title of "assistant in sociology." A faculty position would have been more fitting for one of the best educated men in the country—black or white—but William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was already well aware of how racism pervaded academia.

Still, the invitation was what he needed to escape the evangelism that dominated Wilberforce College, where he had spent his first years teaching after completing his Ph.D. at Harvard (*tell story about Du Bois being asked to offer the prayer during chapel*). He hoped that, if he could impress his new employer, the University of Pennsylvania might offer something more permanent. So, in the summer of 1896, he moved with his new bride, Nina Gomer, into a room above the settlement house just north of South Street at the edge of Philadelphia's old Seventh Ward. At that time, the Seventh Ward was 30% black and the heart of black Philadelphia.

(Describe boundaries of the Seventh Ward; heart of black Philadelphia)

THE PROBLEM

Like their counterparts in London, Chicago, Boston, and New York, the women who ran Philadelphia's settlement house were dedicated to helping the poor in their neighborhood through a range of social service and education programs. The women were also active in local politics, assembling a slate of progressive candidates to challenge the complacent Republican Party that had dominated Philadelphia politics for decades. But the Seventh Ward was a lock for the Republicans in part because blacks sold their votes in exchange for a very limited number of municipal jobs and protection for their voting clubs, which were often illegal drinking houses. This was a major part of the so-called "Negro problem" that Du Bois was invited to study.

That blacks would sell their votes so cheaply indicated how deep the racial discrimination was in Philadelphia. Blacks had almost no access to the manufacturing jobs that allowed Irish, German, Russian, and Italian immigrants of the nineteenth Century to take care of their families. Municipal jobs offered a welcome alternative to the domestic service work that occupied 30 percent of black men and 70 percent of black women in Philadelphia at the turn of the century. The settlement ladies looked to Du Bois to validate their ideas about the causes and solutions to the problems in the Seventh Ward. It seems only fair that Du Bois had ulterior motives in accepting the Philadelphia invitation given how little interest the University had in him and how sure the settlement association ladies were that they already knew what was wrong with the Seventh Ward.

THE BOOK

Du Bois did not let any of this impact the quality of his research. He tirelessly interviewed members of the 2,500 black households within the densely-populated study area and identified the key institutions in the community. His most important finding was that racial discrimination was a primary cause of black poverty. Put another way, he reframed the idea of the "Negro problem" to be the problems that Negroes faced rather than caused. This was a profound conclusion in 1899, when the social and natural sciences both still assumed the biological inferiority of blacks.

His final report also provided insight into black class structure which constituted an important intellectual contribution. (*Describe pull-out color-coded map*). His insistence on distinguishing among blacks also sounded like the personal plea of an accomplished black man who did not want to be confused with the poor people of the Seventh Ward. He wrote, "There is always a strong tendency on the part of the community to consider the Negroes as composing one practically homogenous mass. Nothing more ex-AS-PER-ates the better class of Negroes than this tendency to ignore utterly their existence." He would later coin the phrase "talented tenth" to refer to elite blacks like himself who, he insisted, had a moral obligation to uplift those in the lower classes.

Penn published *The Philadelphia Negro* in 1899. The book was regarded at the time as a sturdy piece of work by those who were willing to review research by a black scholar (the *American Journal of Sociology*, among others, was not). The University never did offer Du Bois a permanent position. Today, the book is considered a classic by sociologists, ethnographers, anthropologists, urban historians and others for its innovative methodology and detailed findings about black city life.

MY CONNECTION

So how did I get interested in this topic? Why is a white woman from New Hampshire drawn to the story of *The Philadelphia Negro*? I was first introduced to the book as a graduate student in an ethnography course talk by sociologist Elijah Anderson, who wrote the introduction to the newest edition of the book. Much of my research focuses on mapping, including research on historical redlining and contemporary public health disparities, and I was captivated by the map in his book from the first time I read the book. Five years ago, I launched a project called Mapping the Du Bois Philadelphia Negro that is dedicated to recreating Du Bois' foot survey using current mapping technology. We have a website where you can see who lived at each property within the Seventh Ward in 1900 and make your own color-coded maps. We've developed curricular materials for high school teachers, including a board game called "Surviving the Seventh Ward." We are finishing up a 30-minute documentary that two high school students filmed. And we worked with the Mural Arts Program to create a mural honoring Du Bois that is now on the wall of the fire station at 6th and South Streets.

One day, while I was giving a tour of the Seventh Ward to some new Penn graduate students, one of the students interrupted me and said, "So, this project is pretty cool. But what is it that you are *really* trying to do?" The question gave me pause. In some ways, I am simply finding my own way and working to save my own soul, perhaps trying to compensate for the fact that I grew up with virtually no people of color in my life and now need to make sense of a world that looks nothing like little North Hampton, NH. I also feel that I am doing penance for the University of Pennsylvania, which failed to recognize and honor Du Bois' intellect and vision solely because he was African American. But the real motivation behind this project is bigger than me or Penn—it's about helping people to engage in an honest conversation about the role of race and racism in our lives today. As UUs, we know that even the best of intentions and strong liberal convictions are not always enough to inspire real dialogue about race. My hope is that a study of black life and racial discrimination from 1896 Philadelphia leads to consideration of why society continues to struggle with many of the challenges that Du Bois recognized in his research and met head on in his career as a civil rights activist.

THE PROBLEM TODAY

To assert that the “Negro Problem” —that is, the problems facing African Americans that Du Bois witnessed a century ago—is the same as what we have today is to oversimplify a complicated century of race relations. We now have legal safeguards against racial discrimination in employment, housing, education, and voting. Our public welfare system provides a layer—at least a thin layer—of economic security unknown 100 years ago. But we still have racism—reshaped, reinvented, and reinforced over the past 100 years. And we have vast racial disparities in nearly all of the areas that matter.

Housing is one of those areas that matter. In Philadelphia and other large cities, public housing tenants are overwhelmingly people of color. Even with all the changes we have seen in public housing in Philadelphia over the last decade, as high rises have come down and been replaced by middle-class looking row houses, how would you assess the life chances of a child who grows up the “projects?” I certainly wouldn’t choose that for my son. Would you?

Homeownership is another important area. Owning your own home has been a central tenant of the American dream and an important element—if not the most important element—in wealth accumulation for decades. According to the most recent figures from the American Community Survey, 64% of white households in Philadelphia own their home while only 52% of African American households do. Why are whites still much more likely to become homeowners than African Americans? Part of the explanation comes from the race-based discrimination in federal housing policies during the 1930s and 1940s that encouraged mortgage redlining, restrictive covenants, and racial segregation. Subsequent Supreme Court decisions and federal legislation that made housing discrimination illegal have done little to reverse the racial and income patterns characterizing metropolitan areas, and the today’s racial wealth gap is explained, in part, by the unequal opportunities to own a home 75 years ago. But we can’t blame all, or even most, of the inequalities that characterize housing today on previous generations. We have our own unfair practices to blame, as well. Take, for example, recent predatory lending practices that have disproportionately targeted people of color and increased their likelihood of losing their homes.

The list goes on and on. In addition to housing discrimination, I’ve also studied outdoor advertising. Would it surprise any of you that outdoor ads for unhealthy products such as tobacco, alcohol, sugary beverages, and fast food cluster around institutions like schools and libraries where children spend time? And that African American areas in Philadelphia are more likely to have such clustering? The patterns relating to access to healthful foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables are similar, with communities of color having fewer supermarkets and more corner stores and take-out restaurants.

I suspect that I am preaching to the choir here. You already know that the playing field is not level, right? You know that white children in Philadelphia have a much better chance of attending a high-achieving school—public or private—and going on to college

than black children. And you know that African American children are more likely to develop asthma, drop out of school, and end up in prison. This certainly doesn't mean that race, or the neighborhood in which you live, is destiny, but it's certainly part of the equation. But what does it mean to be in the choir, to be among those who know that this isn't as it should be? It doesn't exempt us from being implicated in the institutionalized forms of racial discrimination that we help to reinforce every day. If anything, we bear a greater responsibility because of our liberal religious values.

Du Bois talked about the tendency for white people to distance themselves from the problems that blacks face by physically distancing themselves through separate work and social circles. Today, most of us insulate ourselves through segregated neighborhoods, schools, and churches. I live, work, and worship with predominantly white groups of people even though Philadelphia is 45 percent African American and my neighborhood, employer, and my church are among the most liberal in the city.

In the concluding chapter of *The Philadelphia Negro*, entitled "the meaning of it all," Du Bois explains that the fundamental "Negro problem" was that whites were denying the humanity of their black neighbors. The world was, in his words, "gliding... into a wider humanity." More different kinds of people were beginning to be accepted. But, as he wrote, "with the Negroes of Africa we come to a full stop... This feeling, widespread and deep-seated, is, in America, the vastest of the Negro problems...." Denying the humanity of the "other" — so often people of color — doesn't have to take an active form such as the overt racism and violence that Dr. King and his contemporaries confronted—the hoses, the dogs, the violence and verbal abuse. Denying the humanity of others can it can also take the form of passive acceptance.

THE ANSWER

Du Bois's intention was, in his words, to "lay before the public such a body of information as may be a safe guide for all efforts toward the solution of the many Negro problems of a great American city." He hoped it would serve as "the scientific basis of further study and of practical reform." But the book did not immediately lead to changes. I don't think it's too late to realize Du Bois's hope for this book. Despite the moralizing language and somewhat dated theories about race and economics, the book still has relevance for us today. It provides an opportunity for kids in Philadelphia to learn about the role of racism in shaping our city. I doubt most of them know that some of the expensive downtown Philadelphia neighborhoods were once home to thousands of African Americans or that blacks were denied access to jobs in the now abandoned factories throughout their neighborhoods. It provides an opportunity for suburban children to study discrimination and privilege in 1896 Philadelphia as a way of thinking more honestly about how they shape their own world today.

The Reverend Victor Carpenter, who was the minister at First Church during the 1960s and 1970s, preached a year ago about the need to “redraw the circle.” This is essentially what Du Bois had in mind, including all people in our definition of humanity.

Redrawing the circle can be a metaphor, referring to the process of making room in our hearts for all people, but it can also refer literally to challenging segregation—in neighborhoods, in workplaces, in schools, and in congregations. Redrawing the circle is not easy work, as the visionary Dr. Martin Luther King and Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois taught us, but it is God’s work. For those of you who will be volunteering your time tomorrow, keep in mind that as important as the work you do painting, cooking, cleaning, and repairing are that it is the relationships you forge and the dialogues in which you engage that can be transformative. Our ties to others, be they among people we paint alongside for a day, sit beside on the bus, or worship with for decades, bind us together, across the many divides we’ve constructed across our social landscape. We know from Dr. King’s letter from a Birmingham Jail, from his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” and “I have a Dream” speeches, and from Dr. Du Bois’s book, *The Philadelphia Negro*, that words do inspire change. Today’s workshop service and tomorrow’s Day of Service offer a chance to be inspired again by the words they offered decades ago that still bear relevance to our struggles. And as James Weldon Johnson wrote in 1900,

Lift every voice and sing,
'Til earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;

May it be so.